

Written evidence submitted by Healthwatch Cambridgeshire and Peterborough (DTY0032)

Healthwatch Cambridgeshire and Peterborough welcomes this inquiry into the provision of NHS dental services. Our Healthwatch hears many stories from local people who cannot get the dental care they need. This submission summarises this intelligence.

Insight

During the past year we have recorded 436 dental enquiries and items of feedback, an average of 36 per month. This accounts for over 22% of our total recorded feedback for the year, making dentistry our second most common feedback topic, only preceded by GP feedback.

Much of this feedback was negative; only 10% of the feedback was of positive sentiment. Most commonly, feedback related to Cambridgeshire and Peterborough residents being unable to access NHS dental services. They reported:

- Being told by dentists that treatment was only available if they paid privately
- Being placed on extremely long waiting lists to obtain an NHS dental appointment
- Being unable to find urgent treatment
- Not being able to eat due to tooth pain
- Asking for help finding NHS dental appointments.

For those who gave information about their income, 20% came from people who do not have enough money for basic necessities. The highest volume of negative feedback (51%) came from people who have only just enough income to provide for basic necessities. Only 7.5% of negative feedback came from residents who considered themselves to have a large amount of disposable income.

Case study

The experience detailed below is a typical example of how people are forced to choose between paying privately for treatment or facing long delays on NHS waiting lists with no guarantee of appointments. This experience is something which will resonate with many residents in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and across England.

“I had an infected wisdom tooth and was in absolute agony couldn’t sleep, eat or do anything due to the pain and swelling on my face. I contacted the emergency dentist through my NHS APP and they said they would call me back in 30 mins which I knew they wouldn’t be able to and managed to call back within 2 hours. I was advised of 2 numbers to call but with no idea when or where I could get seen on NHS. I was in absolute agony so I decided to just pay whatever it is to get help.

I called a local surgery who have dissolved their NHS Contract and joined a private plan. They diagnosed an infected wisdom tooth and prescribed antibiotics. They advised it would need to be extracted once the infection had gone. The cost to me privately for that emergency appointment was £85 then on top of that the private prescription cost. Also after that it was going to be £229 for the extraction or on the NHS £60.

So with the doom and gloom of finding an NHS dentist near Christmas not being likely I had no option to pay privately. I also had to weigh up the fuel to get to the destination.

I am a mother of two and work part time these costs are not just affordable. After the extraction I got a dry socket, the dental practice didn't charge me for the 2nd emergency appointment but I did have to pay the private prescription charge for some more antibiotics. I did get looked after well at the dental practice but I do feel very sad that I had to lose so much money to get out of pain."

Health Inequalities

Edgar, who is homeless and whose first language is not English, told us:

'Can't register for a dentist locally but also cannot afford to travel or afford treatment. Have been rejected by a dentist who was advertising spaces for NHS patients – offered 2 year waiting list'.

He added that he probably now needs dentures. He and his support workers are almost resigned to him never getting dental treatment.

Jane is a retired older woman. She told us that she could not get an NHS appointment with her dentist as she had not been for five years, due to not being able to afford it and then Covid. He told her he would only see her if she went private. She was in terrible pain and so agreed to private treatment. This treatment cost her £2,000 which she had to use equity release funding to cover, as she could not afford it on her pension and is not entitled to any benefits.

Action taken by Healthwatch Cambridgeshire and Peterborough

In 2019 our Healthwatch investigated NHS dental provision in Peterborough and north Cambridgeshire. We found that people could not find any routine NHS dental care and that they were using the emergency Dental Access Centres. We learned then that these centres were overwhelmed with patients. More than 14,000 patients were turned away between April 2017 – March 2018, with the highest numbers in Wisbech and Peterborough.

Our reports have helped secure extra funding for these emergency centres but, since Covid, the situation has deteriorated across the whole of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

Locally, the extra funding for dental care, announced by the government in January 2022, has not been used as the dental providers were unable to secure the extra staff in the required timescale.

Healthwatch in the Eastern region meet regularly with NHS England dental commissioners to share intelligence. Whilst this intelligence is warmly welcomed, we have not seen any improvements or resolution of the concerns. We have repeatedly raised the concern that dentists do not update their information on the NHS England website. People find this very frustrating and confusing.

Furthermore, people are told to contact their local Healthwatch to help them find an NHS dentist. We therefore have many people who believe we can help them and then are upset when we can't. We have repeatedly asked for the website information to be changed.

Our Healthwatch has excellent links with our Local Dental Committee. Their chair has a range of long-term solutions around the composition of the dental workforce. We have introduced him to our ICS Workforce Programme Board to try to put ideas into action.

We regularly feedback people's experiences with NHS dentistry to both Peterborough City, and Cambridgeshire County Councils' Health Overview and Scrutiny committees.

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